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# Singing Counter

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## SINGING COUNTER

*after Hayes and Mary Turner, Valdosta, Georgia, May 1918*

The rope, the tree,  
the tired comparison to Jesus on the Cross. Avoid the tropes.

The metaphors.  
*This* stands for *that*, but if no one *black* ever says *that*, how would

someone *white* learn  
*this*? How would any of *us*? I desire the surprise of intellectual,

fractured lyrics.  
Yet here I am, refusing refusal. Calling the mob out by name.

Not even safely—  
as with an anonymous *South*—but uncomfortably. As with *white*

man by *white* man.  
(I'm scared just saying it.) And locating each in case

you have trouble.  
(My People are exceedingly patient.) There: the expected

poor, drunk one,  
neck darkened in the field. He's a nice cliché. But not the next:

a churchgoer  
and father. A man who believes in Christ and the love of a virtuous

woman who fries  
chicken for picnics and stirs up lemon cakes. After the lynching

he will continue  
to believe and live his life in a good fashion. Beside him, his little boy,  
  
smiling, his teeth  
only beginning to loosen as he moves from baby to heir. He will grow,  
  
remember his father's  
beauty, the godly meat in that chest. In the back of this crowd,  
  
a young scholar  
home from college, brought by his friends who wanted to see  
  
if what their science  
professor said was true, that niggers did not feel pain the same  
  
as better men.  
Too old for the rowdy festival, someone's grandfather  
  
remains at home.  
An educated-in-the-North patrician who owns the newspaper  
  
that later will run  
the story. A savage raised his voice to a man. (One tenor  
  
singing counter  
to the other.) Or, he asked for his pay on Friday. Or, he  
  
did not dance  
when desired. Or, he did not step off the sidewalk for a lady.  
  
(Should I explain  
the Southern Anthropological Equation of *lady* plus *race*?)

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Her flowered honor  
required protecting. The imperative of her womanhood:

ax and gasoline  
and black blood. Pig-like screams of what is not a man to the mob,

but a side  
of meat. What never was in this place. I will admit these things

in my contemporary  
time, but not out loud. My white friends and colleagues

(who are not  
My People) would feel indicted by my saying, *I look at you and yes,*

*I'm frightened.*  
*I wonder if you would have sliced off my toe as I hung there, roasting over*

*the slowest fire*  
*the mob could build. And later, killed my pregnant wife, the baby*

*still inside her.*  
I'm a sinner. I fear what I crave. Or love. Part of the falling,

the romance,  
is a quandary keeping the present *here*. The past *there*.

A liquid-filled jar  
of sex in a general store: before that day, its name was Hayes.

He made the mistake  
of calling to her. Mary answered, her hand resting on her belly.